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## THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT

### XII. ATONEMENT IN THE WRITINGS ASCRIBED TO JOHN

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It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to enter into the question of the authorship and date of the Fourth Gospel, the epistles commonly called John's, and the Apocalypse. It is assumed, though without attempt to argue the case, first, that all these writings are among the later of the New Testament books, and hence call for consideration at about this point, and second, that the gospel and first epistle proceed from the same author, or at least from the same school of thought, and that therefore what they severally have to say about atonement may be considered together. The ideas of the book of Revelation about atonement must be treated separately, since it cannot be confidently affirmed that this also is from the same school and period as the gospel and epistle. With the second and third epistles we need not concern ourselves, since they have nothing to say about atonement. The evidence of the gospel concerning the thought of John the Baptist and Jesus has already been considered.

That the author of the Gospel and First Epistle of John believed that there was alienation between God and men and hence need of atonement, is perfectly clear. "The whole world lieth in the evil one" (I John 5:19). "The wrath of God abideth on him who obeyeth not the Son" (John 3:36). "He that believeth not God hath made him a liar" (I John 5:10). The general term for the cause of this alienation is sin (I John 2:4; 15:17). The specific forms of sin most commonly spoken of are the hatred of one's brother, love of the world and the things that are in the world, and most especially rejection of Jesus, denial that he is the Christ, not believing the witness that God hath borne concerning his Son, not obeying the Son. The central condemnatory element in sin is the rejection of the light that God has given to men. "This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the

light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). This is identical with the doctrine of Paul that the wrath of God is against those who hold down the truth in iniquity.

The condition of forgiveness is very definitely stated in the first epistle. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (I John 1:3, 9). The use of the two terms faithful and righteous to describe that in God which assures the forgiveness of the sinner and his cleansing from unrighteousness is of great significance. If with Westcott we join the word "faithful" with "forgive us our sins," and the word "righteous," with "cleanse us from all unrighteousness," the fidelity of God to his promises assures us of forgiveness, and his righteousness, his moral uprightness, involving hatred of sin and desire that men shall cease from sinning, carries with it the moral purification of the confessor. In that case there underlies the passage the thought, first, that God has promised to forgive him who confesses his sins to be sins, and so repudiates them, and that he will keep this promise, and, second, that God loving righteousness and hating sin will certainly avail himself of the confession of sin on the part of any sinner to cleanse that one from sin. If on the other hand the two predicates "faithful and righteous" are both related to both the consequent phrases, to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, then both God's fidelity to his promise and his righteousness, meaning his recognition of the moral status of men and his treatment of them in accordance with that status, involve both forgiveness and cleansing. Upon this interpretation which is perhaps the more probable one, it is involved in God's faithfulness and righteousness that he should recognize the changed moral status of one who confesses his sin, not continuing his disapproval and wrath toward one who is no longer purposing to sin, but approving and restoring to favor such a one, and accomplishing the moral cleansing which repentance makes possible. Thus, in Pauline phrase, the judgment of God is according to truth.

The converse and complement of this teaching is expressed in a later passage. "He that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous" (I John 3:7). The assertion is evidently directed

against those who continue in sin and justify themselves in so doing while still claiming to be children of God. The term *righteous* in the first clause must be taken as at least including the thought of acceptableness to God; for otherwise the sentence is mere tautology. He whose conduct is *righteous*, he only is *righteous*, approved of God. It is indeed evidently one of the chief purposes of the epistle to insist upon this doctrine of the essentially ethical as well as religious character of the Christian life. There is no forgiveness of sins while we refuse to acknowledge our sins. There is no acceptance with God while we do not work righteousness. The righteousness of the Christian is not an attached or fictitious thing. All unrighteousness is sin, and he who professes to love God but hates his brother is a liar. Whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother. But he who confesses and repudiates his sin, he finds forgiveness.

That the epistle also teaches that sins are forgiven for his name's sake (2:12) in no way modifies this teaching. The pronoun "*his*" doubtless refers to God, who in 1:9 has been said to be faithful and righteous to forgive sins. The name stands for the character of God as there set forth, his faithfulness and righteousness. The meaning then is that because of his faithfulness and righteousness he has forgiven their sins. Confession of them is of course taken for granted and the passage in effect repeats the thought of 1:8, 9.<sup>1</sup>

The teaching of 5:16 of the epistle, "If a man see his brother sinning a sin not unto death, he shall ask and God shall give him life for them that sin not unto death," is twofold: that sin is forgivable, there is a sin that is not unto death; and that prayer avails to secure forgiveness for another. This, however, cannot be taken to exclude those conditions of forgiveness either in the sinner or in the work of Christ which we elsewhere find clearly set forth by the writer.

The doctrine of this epistle is, then, that acceptance with God, reconciliation with him, is conditioned upon a change of life to righteousness, but that he who does by confession of his sin turn his back

<sup>1</sup> If, as some think, the pronoun refers to Christ, the expression is brachylogical, meaning, "Your sins are forgiven you because you have believed in the name of the Son of God," i. e., accepted him as the Son of God. If this is the thought, the full significance of the passage will appear only when we consider further the relation of Jesus to forgiveness.

upon his sin is forgiven and enters upon a new life in which there is cleansing from all unrighteousness.

Thus far we have dealt with passages which speak of forgiveness without associating it with the sufferings of Jesus. It remains to examine those which indicate the writer's thought concerning the relation of Jesus to forgiveness of sin, and the meaning of his death. The following passages from the first epistle call for consideration:

If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all unrighteousness (1:17).

If any man sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the whole world (2:1, 2).

And ye know that he was manifested to take away sins (3:5).

Hereby know we love, because he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren (3:16).

Herein was the love of God manifested in us, that God hath sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (4:9-11).

It is of course difficult to distinguish sharply between those elements of the gospel that are traceable to John the Baptist and to Jesus, and that which belongs to the later author. But account must be taken at least of such passages as John 1:29; 3:16 ff.; 3:36; 19:34.

Again we must forego extended interpretation and endeavor to sum up the unmistakable elements of the writer's thought:

1. The sending of Jesus into the world was an expression of the love of God for the world, and was for the salvation of the world. If God so loved us we ought also to love one another.

2. The death of Jesus was an expression of his own love for men, and an example to us that as he loved so also ought we to love, and be ready to lay down our lives for the brethren. This is in accordance with the teaching of Jesus himself that his death was in obedience to a principle which ought to rule in other men's lives also as in his.

3. Jesus is the propitiation for the sins of those who believe in him, and for the sins of the whole world. The necessity of propitiation for sins implies that sins have created alienation, that God is displeased with sinners, that they are objects of his wrath. It is the

mission of Jesus Christ to remove this alienation and bring about reconciliation. Yet he does not do this by changing the disposition of God toward sinners. It is God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish. It is God who sent his Son to be the propitiation for sins. In his love the Son is the expression of the Father's love for the sinful world. Nor does he become the propitiation for the sins of the world in that he provided some objectively available compensation for the sins of the world. For it is emphatically affirmed that they only are at peace with God, who do not deny but confess, and thereby repudiate, their sins, who love as God loves, who being born of God sin not, but work righteousness. We must understand therefore that he becomes propitiatory through the effecting of a moral change in those who become reconciled to God through him. And this view of the case is the more clearly seen to be that of the writer, when we note that he says that the Son was manifested "to take away sins," the context making it clear that to take away sins is to cause them to cease. It is further confirmed by the statement that the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all unrighteousness. For while the blood undoubtedly conveys a reference to the death of Jesus in the sense that it designates his shed blood, yet alike the general usage of the Old Testament, in which blood is the symbol of life, and especially the language of the gospel in the sixth chapter, make it evident that the blood of Jesus is the symbol of his life, which may be imparted to and appropriated by those who believe in him, and who through such appropriation become like him in character, living by the same principle of life. This principle of life he disclosed pre-eminently in that he laid down his life for men. It is the principle of love, and in his exemplification he both revealed the love of God, for God is love, and the one principle by which all human lives should be lived.

It is worth observing that the epistle nowhere says that the death of Jesus is propitiatory. He is propitiatory and his death is vicarious but the interpretation of these statements which consistently accounts for them all is that the death of Jesus is effective in that it discloses that principle of living which being the principle of God's own life must become the principle of human lives in order that they may be reconciled to God, and that it so reveals this principle that they who

believe on the Son of God in whom it is revealed become partakers of his life.

It is from this point of view that we must understand the statement that if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. The sentence refers not to the world in general, but to those who have confessed their sins and are living righteous lives. If such fall into sin, they have an advocate with the Father, their sin does not utterly separate them from God. The life of Jesus Christ the righteous with whom they have fellowship pleads for them. And he is the propitiation for their sins. And not for theirs only, but for any who will come into life-relationship with him.

From this point of view also it becomes evident that the testimony of John the Baptist concerning Jesus, "Behold the lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world," might mean for this writer, Behold the innocent one who will suffer not for his own sin but for that of others, and who suffering thus will win men from their sin, thus causing sins to cease. But as to the meaning of this passage see more fully in the *Biblical World*, May, 1908, pp. 351 ff.

The doctrine of the atonement taught by the writer of the Epistle and Gospel of John is, we conclude, this: that the sinner is reconciled to God through confessing his sins, believing in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and appropriating his spirit as manifested preeminently in his laying down his life on behalf of men.

It is not the immediate purpose of the Johannine Apocalypse to set forth either the cause of alienation between God and sinful men, or a doctrine of the basis of forgiveness. Yet it is clearly implied in many passages, both that there is such alienation and that reconciliation is possible. The present discussion is limited to the consideration of this latter matter and the relation of Christ to it, i. e., to atonement and the part which Jesus has in it.

The passages that specially call for consideration are the following: 1:6-8; 5:6, 9, 12; 6:16, 17; 7:14; 13:9; 14:1, 4; 17:14; 19:7-9.

These passages repeatedly speak of the Lamb that was slain, or that stood as having been slain. There can be no doubt that this is a title for Jesus Christ. For it is of Jesus Christ specifically that it is said in 1:6, that he "loveth us and loosed us from our sins by his blood," and to the Lamb it is said in 5:9, "For thou wast slain, and

didst purchase unto God with thy blood men of every tribe and tongue and people and nation." By his blood therefore, meaning his blood shed in his death, it is taught that Jesus redeemed men from their sins. The thought and phraseology are similar to the language of Paul in Rom. 3:24 f., "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus whom God set forth . . . in his blood;" and still more to that of I Peter 1:18, "Knowing that ye were redeemed, not with corruptible things, with silver or gold, from your vain manner of life handed down from your fathers; but with precious blood, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, *even the blood* of Christ." Which of the two ideas of redemption, that of Romans, which is probably redemption from the condemnation of sin, or that of I Peter, which is clearly redemption from an evil life, the apocalypticist has in mind is not perfectly clear. Nor is it wholly clear how Jesus' death accomplishes redemption. The explanation is possibly to be found in 7:14, "These are they which come out of the great tribulation; and they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." This language seems clearly to refer to a moral purification, and if the washing is thought of as taking place in the blood of the Lamb, this can scarcely be other than a highly figurative expression for moral purification through the all-cleansing influence of that moral life of the Christ which he manifested in his death.<sup>2</sup> That the cleansed robes are the symbol of righteous character is made quite clear from 19:7-9, "The marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And it was given unto her that she should array herself in fine linen, bright and pure; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints."

One other aspect of the conception of the Lamb also deserves mention. When the sixth seal is opened the wicked say to the rocks and to the mountains, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him

<sup>2</sup> Weiss thinks that "in the blood" denotes not the element in which the washing takes place, but that through which those who come out of the great tribulation were enabled to cleanse their robes, the cleansing itself taking place in their martyrdom. In substantiation of this view, Weiss appeals to 12:11, "And they overcame him (Satan) because of the blood of the Lamb, and because of the word of their testimony, and they loved not their life even unto death." In this latter passage clearly, and if it furnishes the clue to the interpretation of the former, then in that also, the martyrs win their victory, cleanse their robes, through the influence of the shed blood of Jesus, that is, through participating in that spirit with which he also endured the cross.



that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath is come" (6:16, 17). And in the great judgment those who were not written in the book of life (elsewhere called the Lamb's book of life) were cast into the lake of fire.

It thus appears that in the thought of the apocalyptist:

1. Those who sin are punished. They are the objects of the wrath of the Lamb.
2. They who have been cleansed from sin, whose robes are clean, being of the fine linen of righteous acts, become the bride of the Lamb.
3. Men are cleansed from sin; their robes are washed; they are purchased unto God to be his people; they overcome Satan because of (or through) the blood of the Lamb that was slain; and by this is meant, apparently, through participation on their part in that moral life, that attitude toward sin and the world, which Jesus manifested in laying down his life.